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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

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Subject: "YOUR HARDWOOD FLOOR." Information from wood chemists and scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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The floor in your home has to take so much wear and tear of living that you want it finished for service as well as looks. You want not only a beautiful floor but a floor that will keep its looks well and be easy to care for. Most housewives aren't chemists and wood experts. They usually take the advice of the painter or the landlord or the salesman behind the counter when it comes to deciding on floor finishes.

Well, today here are some tips on floor finishes from wood scientists of the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service. Here are some facts about floor finishes to help you understand the various finishes in use today and decide which kind best suits your needs. These scientists say no finish yet discovered is perfect. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Years ago our grandfathers used to finish their fine hardwood floors with hot linseed oil and elbow grease. That is to say, they put on application after application of hot linseed oil and rubbed the oil in by hand. They put on the hot oil, buffed it down; put on more, rubbed down more; and kept on until the wood absorbed all the oil it could take. Then they waxed the floor. That old-time way of finishing floors made a finish that wore like iron, didn't show scratches, was easy to keep clean, and could be easily patched in places where it began to show wear. But that old way of finishing took a great deal of time and labor. It was a long tedious job. And in time floors finished this way did turn dark.

So people began finishing floors by easier and quicker methods. They began

using shellac and varnish which were far easier to apply. These finishes didn't penetrate the wood as the oil did; they simply formed a coat over the surface.

Now in recent years the trend is back again in the direction of the penetrating finish. Today modernized versions of that finish are on the market. They are called "floor seals." And they don't take so much work in applying. So today you have your choice of the coating finishes, like varnish and shellac; or the floor seals designed to sink in the wood and seal the pores.

Let's look into the different qualities of these different finishes. Let's consider shellac first because shellac is by far the most common finish for floors today. Shellac is used so much because it dries fast. Call a floor man in, and tell him to finish or refinish your floor with shellac, and he can have it ready for use in 24 hours. You can see why painters and landlords prefer to finish floors with shellac. It's so quick and easy. Wax on a thick coat of shellac may make the floor too slippery. But you can buff down the shellac to a thinner layer and then wax it. Many people like a light floor. Shellac answers their purpose because it doesn't turn dark with time as varnish does, and as the old linseed oil finish did.

But shellac has disadvantages, too. One disadvantage is that water spilled on it and left to stand makes white spots. Rain coming in the window, for example, may leave white smudges on your floor. Another disadvantage of shellac is that it scratches easily. Shoe nails and scraping chair legs can quickly mar the finish. Then a shellac finish doesn't patch successfully. Once the shellac wears through to the wood, you can't patch that spot so it doesn't show. You have to remove the finish from the whole floor and finish it all over again. The way to avoid this is to put a new coat of shellac over the floor before the finish wears through anywhere.

Now for some facts about varnish. Varnish like shellac forms a coat over

the floor, but varnish takes longer to dry. Where shellac needs only 24 hours to be ready for use varnish needs several days. But varnish is a tougher finish and it doesn't scratch so easily. Also it doesn't turn white when water stands on it. Varnish darkens with age. As you put on more coats, the floor becomes darker. Like shellac, varnish doesn't patch successfully. You have to keep applying new coats before it wears through.

Finally about the new floor seals, now made up in different mixtures and selling under different names. Naturally, some of these mixtures make a better finish than others. They all penetrate the wood, but they don't penetrate as deeply as the old oil finish did. On the other hand, they don't require the tedious time and labor that the old oil finish did. Floors finished with a floor seal need frequent waxing. But they are easy to keep clean just by dry mopping; they don't spot with water; and they don't show scratches. Worn places in the finish can be patched without refinishing the whole room. Wax on top of a floor seal makes a floor that is less slippery than wax on top of shellac or varnish. A good floor seal properly applied gives good service with the minimum of care.

Well, there are some facts about different finishes for your floors. Another day we'll have some tips on caring for these floors.

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